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Siouxland Ozymandias

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Siouxland Ozymandias

Abstract

This is a podcast from Dr. James Schaap's *Small Wonders*, a series of historical vignettes about regional history for KWTI/KOIA public radio in Sioux City, Iowa. Podcasts of these and other stories from the collection, read by the author, can also be found on the station's website, www.KWTI.org, by entering Professor Schaap's name in the search field.

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Comments

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Siouxland Ozymandias

Oddly enough, the empire began by way of a very sore bum. An Englishman named William Brooks Close, who, with his brothers, was in Philadelphia for a rowing match in 1876, so banged up his posterior in practice, that he could not sit without pillows. While the rest of the crew continued to work out, but he had to sit out.

And so, he met a wealthy American from Illinois, a Mr. Daniel Paullin (who lent his name to the town of Paullina). Mr. Paullin made very clear to Mr. William B. Close, the dandy from Britain, that good money could be made in still largely unsettled northwest Iowa.

Now the Close brothers were rich, Cambridge grads kids who loved playing polo and hunting fox. William B. may well have been “yearning to be free,” but he and his brothers should not be mistaken for “your tired, your poor, your huddled masses.” Sore bum or not, the Close brothers didn’t sit on their laurels.

They found America's beckoning frontier to be a thrill. Rather than return to England, he traveled around, south into Dixie, north into Canada, and west into Kansas and Nebraska.

But when it was time to invest, he chose the unsettled rolling prairies of northwest Iowa, convinced good money could be made here. More Euro-Americans were coming, after all, as they had been coming to every corner of the map.

Their first purchase, 3000 acres at \$3.50/acre, was between Mapleton and Denison. The Close Brothers' empire grew when they determined the best way to colonize all that open land was by tenant farming, sharing the cost—and the income—with those who actually worked the land. They were, trust me, marvelously successful, not only because thousands of those huddled masses wanted in, but also because Europe crop failures pushed commodity prices delightfully up.

So they started looking north for *more* land, which they bought at bargain-basement prices, when grasshoppers, three years running, made life totally miserable here. In 1879, only three years since that East coast rowing match, William B. Close, who'd married Mr. Paullin's daughter, teamed up with venture capitalists and bought 16000 acres of land in Woodbury, Plymouth, and Cherokee County at just \$2.40 an acre, then moved their business north to LeMars, where their Brit roots prompted yet another grand idea—why not bring over more rich young English boys and give them a shot at the American frontier, build them a pub or two, let them hunt fox on a huge landscape unlike anything in jolly old England? Bring in some trusty ponies and play polo, downtown LeMars. For some time, everything the Close Brothers touched turned to gold.

In 1880 they bought 19,000 more acres in Lyon County, and plotted out their own first town, Quorn, in far southern Plymouth County. The *Sioux City Journal* crowed about the Close Brothers this way:

Some idea of the magnitude of the English interests in Northwestern Iowa may be inferred from the taxes paid by Close Bros. & Co., for themselves and the investors represented by the firm, in this county, \$1,400; Plymouth county, \$4,000; Sioux county, \$1,600; Lyon county, \$5,000; and in Osceola county \$1,500. In the latter county there is beside this \$10,000 taxes paid by the Iowa Land Company, Limited, of which the Duke of Sutherland is the heavy man.

At the height of the power in 1884, the Close Brothers owned 450,000 Siouxland acres, or 700 square miles of the richest agricultural land in the region.

Today, here and there in the countryside some grand house remains, a mansion or two, where English gentry spent some years in Siouxland. They left their polo sticks behind on the wall at the Plymouth County Museum.

Go to Kingsley some time (the name is a gift from the British invasion), turn west off the main drag, and follow a woeful road, even when it turns to gravel. Watch the pot holes, or your car will hate you. Soon enough, you'll roll up to a cattle yard, and there to your right, you'll see a nicely printed sign standing high enough above the road not to get mud-spattered.

It says "Historical Site of Quorn, Platted 1880." Behind it lies the west branch of the Little Sioux River. Nothing more--just a sign on a gravel road is all there's left to see of this whole epic tale.

It's an odd place to pull over, but do it, sit there and read the sign, all that's left of a kingdom.

It's like another Brit, Percy Bysshe Shelley, once wrote, ". . .nothing beside remains. .

.boundless and bare/The long and level sands stretch far away."